Consuming the Inauthentic As Self Authenticating Act in Insa-Dong, Seoul  
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This study proposes that cynicism as self-authenticating act based on the experiences of South Korean consumers in traditional cultural district of Insa-dong, Seoul. Korean nationalism is suggested as a condition that makes consumers engaged in the consumption of the inauthentic, which leads to the reproduction of hegemonic Korean nationalism.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1025019/volumes/v45/NA-45

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

As authenticating acts and authoritative performances (Arnould and Price 2000), tourism has provided researchers with fertile ground to examine the pursuit of authenticity through consumption. MacCannell (1973) indicates that modern tourists, who are concerned about the shallowness and inauthenticity of their lives, are motivated by the hope of discovering and experiencing authentic cultures. Although—as Cohen (1988) suggests—authenticity is a socially negotiable concept perceived by individuals based on their own personal experiences and expectations (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006), prior research has established that objects and experiences that are perceived inauthentic may not have the ability to authenticate one’s individual and communal identity. However, the present study attempts to put on the weight to the other side by showing that through cynicism, perceived inauthenticity could authenticate consumers’ individual and communal identities, based on an examination of consumption in the traditional cultural district of Insa-dong in Seoul, South Korea. Insa-dong is an ideal empirical setting because about 100,000 domestic and foreign tourists visit the district every day (Insa Traditional Culture Preservation Association 2012), but many Koreans often criticize it as inauthentic and overly commercialized.

While early studies on cynicism tend to view it as a psychological defect that needs to be corrected (Fleming and Spicer 2003), more recent research shows that cynicism is not necessarily unethical and does not lead to negative outcomes for organizations, employees, and consumers, emphasizing its role in social critique (Karfakis and Kokkinidis 2011) and consumer resistance to the consumerist marketplace (Mikkonen, Moisander, and Firat 2011). However, both negative and positive cynicism often have an effect on individuals’ identity construction as protection against aggressive marketing practices (Helm 2004; Odou and de Pechpeyrou 2010) and overwhelming managerial controls (Casey 1995; Kunda 1992). As seen in Mikkonen et al. (2011), cynicism is also part of the consumer identity project by allowing people to take the moral high ground to disillusioned members of society and organizations. However, it does not necessarily lead to reforming actions that help change society or organizations (Bloom 2008) because while cynical individuals may dis-identify with cultural prescriptions of a given society or organization they still perform them (Fleming and Spicer 2003), and, arguably, one such case in modern society is nationalism.

While nation and nationalism have long been discussed as a contingent outcome of modernity (Gellner 1983) based on artificial invention of tradition (Hobsbawm 1983), recent studies on nationalism examine everyday reproduction of nationhood. They highlight that the seemingly declining importance of national identity, as commonly claimed by postmodernists, may be based on the fact that people take national identity for granted in their everyday life. Billig (1995) calls this taken for granted national identity banal nationalism. In their everyday life, the citizens of a nation are reminded of their national place in a world of nations, but this reminding is so familiar that it is not consciously registered as a reminding, thus reproducing embodied national identity (Billig 1995). For instance, nations are reproduced through ordinary people’s mundane practices (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008) such as consumption of consumer goods (Belk and Paun 1995; Douglas and Isherwood 1979). In this vein, consumption practices in Insa-dong may play an important role in reproducing Korean identity. Korean tradition-themed commodities and experiences in the district may flag or remind consumers of Korean national identity regardless of whether they enjoy or criticize the offered commodities and experiences. Rather than mindless acceptance and enjoyment, criticism on the authenticity of the place and the offered commodities may engage these consumers more strongly in the matter of whether the commodity/service is truly Korean. In this process, Korean identity may be reproduced even though they are not directly involved in actual consumption of such inauthentic commodities. Therefore, while criticizing or talking about national tradition and its authenticity, nations can be discursively constituted (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008).

The primary data for this research project were collected in 2013 through qualitative interviews with 24 native Korean consumers who had prior experiences in visiting Insa-dong. Materials and photos obtained since 2004 through multiple observations in the location were used as supplement data for our project. Other supplementary data include websites of Insa-dong-related entities, government promotional materials, newspaper articles, documentaries about Insa-dong, movies about Korean tradition, among others. Data analysis entailed an iterative process of coding and categorizing. Provisional understandings of consumers’ experiences were formed, challenged, and revised in multiple readings of the individual transcripts and the data set as a whole in conjunction with emerging themes, including cynicism on Insa-dong and the relation between the consumption of Insa-dong and the consumer self.

In contrast to a typical description of the place as “a museum alive with the lives, histories, and cultures of Korean people” (Insa Traditional Culture Preservation Association 2012), the research participants perceived Insa-dong as an inauthentic representation of Korean traditional culture despite its official christening as a traditional cultural district. Data analysis demonstrates that despite its contested authenticity, however, consuming the place brand of Insa-dong authenticates the individual consumer self and reproduces a national identity as Korean through engaged cynicism on commercialization, governmental control, and the static view of tradition that the government and businesses in the district take in constructing the place.

Through our analysis, Korean nationalism, which incorporates both banal and hot nationalism based on the historical trajectory of Koreans who experienced both brutal colonialism and rapid economic development after the Korean War, has emerged as a condition that makes consumers engage in the consumption of the place despite their perceived inauthenticity of the themed place. This reinforces the association of Insa-dong and Korean tradition and ultimately the reproduction of Korean national identity for the consumers of the place.

By examining the consumption practices in a traditional cultural district of Insa-dong, this study has illustrated the role of cynicism as an important mechanism to authenticate the self for modern consumers who often face inauthentic market offerings. This study also shows that socio-cultural ideology such as nationalism is an important condition for consumers’ ongoing engagement in inauthenticity.

**REFERENCES**


